

International Assessments: Merits and Pitfalls

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Abstract

Forty years have passed since educational achievements were first compared on an international scale. What began as a hesitant and sporadic attempt to compare scholastic achievements in various countries has grown into a well-established enterprise encompassing close to 50 countries worldwide. Perhaps as a function of globalization and increasing awareness of the role human capital plays in furthering economic development, policy makers around the world are expressing growing interest in the results of such surveys, realizing their importance for precipitating educational reform.

The quality of international comparisons of educational achievements has improved consistently as experience in the field has accumulated. Nevertheless, policy makers in many countries still fail to interpret the results of cross-national surveys in an accurate and useful manner, partly because they are unaware of the potential influence that diverse methodological factors have on the results of the tests.

The present paper discusses the impact of various factors, other than achievement, on test performance. These factors include sampling, administration, translation and adaptation, factors associated with the structure of the test (e.g., item format and test specifications) and lastly, response evaluation and data entry processes. A profound understanding of the role that these factors play in the assessment process can contribute to more accurate interpretation of the results obtained and a better appreciation of changes that occur over time.